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Dear People of the Diocese of Ballarat,

Over recent weeks, attention has been focussed by the Media on the Catholic Church and in particular on the Diocese of Ballarat. Once again Bishops have been challenged to reflect anew on how we have responded to the scourge of sexual and physical assault by Catholic Church personnel on innocent victims, especially children and young people.

I can only attempt to appreciate the degree of pain, suffering, and trauma that is experienced by those who have been subjected to such violation. The nearest and dearest of these victims are also confused and angered by the breach of trust by those whom they had formerly respected and admired. The communities where these incidents have occurred are also scandalized and hurt by the revelation of these regrettable incidents. They are oftentimes bewildered and wonder how they can remain active in the practice of their faith.

I have been told of the hurt, embarrassment and ridicule to which many Catholics have been subjected in recent years and I feel for you.

Over the last ten years, I have come to learn more and more about the ongoing effects of the abuse of children, adolescents and adults placed in their pastoral care by a number of clergy and religious. With bishops and Leaders of Religious Institutes of the Catholic Church, I acknowledge with deep sadness and regret that such abuse has happened and I offer a sincere apology to the victims and their families.

In attempting to make a suitable response, I have endeavoured to remain faithful to the principles and the procedures set out in the document "Towards Healing" first published in December 1996.

When the victim has desired it, I have been willing to meet with her or him face to face to listen to their feelings and to express my genuine concern. An offer has always been made to assist with the financial costs associated with counselling and therapy by experts if that was what they chose to do.

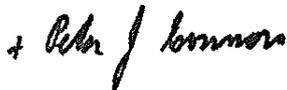
My attention has been directed to the clause in "Towards Healing" which states that "no complainant shall be required to give an undertaking which imposes upon them the obligation of silence concerning the circumstances which led them to make a complaint, as a condition of an agreement with the Church authority". Acting in good faith and on advice, abiding by the normal procedures in cases of facilitation leading to financial compensation, I have not always observed this clause. I want victims who have signed a settlement with the Diocese of Ballarat to know that any non-disclosure clauses are no longer operative so far as they apply to themselves. However having given such undertakings myself I intend to honour them.

I wish to acknowledge and to extend my gratitude for the many expressions of concern, support and appreciation that you and other people of good will have extended to the priests of the Diocese of Ballarat in recent days. These men strive to be faithful to the ideals of their calling and have a deep and genuine love for all whom they serve.

Finally, I trust that you the People of the Diocese of Ballarat will support and work with me to do all that is humanly possible in reaching out to the victims and their families. Let us pray often for them that they will eventually experience the healing hand of God who can give them the peace that God alone can give.

With every best wish.

Yours sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Peter J. Linnemann".

Bishop of Ballarat